

CHAPTER EIGHT: PUBLIC ACCESS, INVOLVEMENT, AND USE PLAN

INTRODUCTION

Fostering an appreciation of the Reserve rests on providing opportunities for the public to experience the site. While the primary uses of the Refuge and Reserve are for wildlife habitat and research, Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) provides exceptional opportunities for the public to access and use the site for recreational purposes. In keeping with the five-year vision for the development of the Reserve, the Public Access, Involvement, and Use plan emphasizes the need for improvements in the southern end of the site. This chapter puts forward a plan to allow for maximum public enjoyment and usage of the site compatible with its protection.

I. MISSION

The Public Access, Involvement, and Use Plan mission of Tijuana River NERR is to provide diverse opportunities for public access and use of the Reserve, compatible with resource protection, and to create opportunities for the public to participate in Reserve operations.

II. GOALS

Goal 1: Encourage and provide opportunities for public involvement in Reserve governance and management.

Goal 2: Provide opportunities for volunteer activities in educational, research assistance, recreational, and cultural programs at the Reserve.

Goal 3: Encourage and improve public access and use opportunities of the Reserve to the extent compatible with resource protection, with emphasis in the southern areas.

Goal 4: Emphasize and expand priority, wildlife-dependent recreational activities of wildlife observation and photography (Refuge goal).

III. POLICIES

A. RESERVE-WIDE POLICIES FOR PUBLIC ACCESS, INVOLVEMENT, AND USE

It is the policy of the Reserve and the constituent land-owning agencies to encourage wildlife-oriented recreation, including wildlife observation, photography, interpretations, and education, compatible with resource protection. Some forms of non-wildlife-oriented recreation such as hiking, horseback riding, and beach use are also encouraged wherever they are compatible.

Fishing is permitted from the intertidal beach, in accordance with state regulations, except in areas seasonally posted as closed to protect endangered species. The following uses are not authorized: hunting, shooting, off-road vehicle operation, or overnight camping. Dogs, where permitted, must be kept on leashes at all times.

Conceptual land-use zoning (See Chapter 5, Conceptual Zoning Scheme) provides general guidance for public access. Some areas of the Reserve contain more sensitive resources than others; spatial zoning provides for resource protection while ensuring appropriate access and recreational opportunities. The general policy for public access in various zones is as follows:

ESZ - Endangered Species Protection Zone (most sensitive): Public access generally prohibited except by Special Use Permit.

WCZ - Wetland/Wildlife Conservation Zone: Access generally limited to Special Use Permits, organized environmental education, and guided interpretive tours.

WOZ - Wildlife Orientation/Interpretive Zone: Access/use as listed above, plus general foot access for wildlife observation and photography.

GRZ - General Recreation Zone: All above uses plus equestrian use on trails, general hiking, and beach use.

Approved trails for hiking and horseback riding are found in Figures 6 and 15. While generally located in the Wildlife Orientation/Interpretive and General Recreation zones, designated trails may provide on-trail access to other areas. Trails are posted to designate authorized modes of use (equestrian, foot, and/or bicycle).

The Reserve is open to the public from 30 minutes before sunrise to 30 minutes after sundown, except by special authorization from the land-owning agency.

B. NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM (NWRS) PUBLIC USE POLICY

1. General

Public involvement is a guiding principle of National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) management. This includes providing regular opportunities for the public to comment on refuge management plans and operations.

All secondary uses of an NWR, including public access and recreation, must be compatible with the purposes for which the refuge is established. (See Appendix 1)

Partnering and volunteer programs are very important to many aspects of NWR management and have full support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

2. Wildlife-Dependent Recreation

Executive Order 12996 and The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 designate the following six (6) forms of wildlife-dependent recreational activities as priority public uses of NWRS:

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Wildlife Observation
- Wildlife Photography
- Environmental Education
- Interpretation

The Secretary of Interior has directed FWS to provide expanded opportunities for these priority uses of NWRS when they are compatible and consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management and are otherwise in the public interest.

At Tijuana Slough NWR, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation have been determined to be compatible uses of the Refuge and are actively promoted by facilities, programs, and this plan.

There have been no known requests or proposals for a Refuge hunting program at Tijuana Slough NWR. There are no big game species in the Refuge; small

game and waterfowl are present. However, the entire Refuge is located within the corporate limits of San Diego and Imperial Beach, both of which prohibit the discharge of firearms. Due to safety issues, the fragility of the habitat, and concerns about endangered species, hunting has been determined to be an incompatible use of Tijuana Slough NWR.

Fishing is authorized in the Pacific Ocean from the intertidal beach areas of Tijuana Slough NWR. All fisheries located in the Refuge are located in state tidelands that are operated as part of the NWR under provisions of California State Land Commission Lease No. PRC 5938.9. The lease specifies that public access and use of the beaches and strand between the ocean and estuary will not be unreasonably restricted. Hence, FWS lacks jurisdiction for determining whether fishing is a compatible use.

At Tijuana Slough NWR, emphasis is placed on enhancing and expanding compatible opportunities for wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Public input is encouraged, and the Reserve partners with other federal, state, and local agencies and private entities.

IV. EXISTING CONDITIONS AND PERCEIVED NEEDS

A. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

1. Visitor Center

In 1991, the Tijuana River achieved one of the major goals established in the 1986 Management Plan: constructing a visitor center in the northern section of the Reserve on a FWS easement provided to the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR). The visitor center has contributed greatly to the public's awareness of the Reserve by providing a centralized location where the public can turn for information, education, interpretation, and general involvement with the Reserve.

2. Public Involvement with Management and Decision-Making

Current opportunities for public involvement in management and decision-making at the Reserve include involvement at the committee level of the Management Authority and public comment during Management Authority meetings. There is a perceived need to improve understanding in the local community about the Reserve and its goals. Responses to this need are listed in the plan of action.

3. Volunteer Program

Volunteers at the Reserve serve as community ambassadors, sharing their enthusiasm for and knowledge of the Reserve area with visitors from within and outside the region. As a result, they become an invaluable asset to the Reserve. This important link with the community enhances public awareness and interest, ultimately serving to secure the future of the Reserve. Reserve staff seek to give volunteers a rich and rewarding experience in order to encourage community members to contribute their time and talent to the furtherance of Reserve goals.

The Tijuana River NERR volunteer program is co-managed by the operating agencies. It draws upon the system-wide volunteer programs of CDPR and the NWRS. Volunteer activities are coordinated by Refuge staff with guidance from Reserve and Refuge managers. Reserve staff maintain a “contact list” of individuals, groups, and schools that provide services to the Reserve. Approximately 250 hours a month are donated by these individuals and groups to a variety of Reserve projects. Volunteers work with staff members on particular projects such as education or watershed monitoring (see Chapter Seven). In 1996, a Volunteer Stewards Program Handbook was completed to ensure standardized training for all volunteers.

Under present staff levels, the following volunteer opportunities are available at the Reserve:

TABLE 11: Volunteer Opportunities at Tijuana River NERR

Administration	Visitor center docents provide support to visitor center staff and assist in the visitor center’s general operations.
Research and Monitoring	Biology volunteers assist biologists in a variety of field and office work related to wildlife management in the San Diego Refuge complex. Several wildlife populations are monitored with assistance from volunteers, including the California least tern and snowy plover nesting sites.
Education and Interpretation	Environmental education docents assist the program through a wide variety of tasks, including: helping with educator-led school field trips, designing and preparing educational displays, developing and presenting slide programs at schools about the Reserve,

	assisting with workshops for teachers and other educators, and helping with public relations.
Public Involvement, Access, and Use	The Mounted Assistance Unit (MAU) offers opportunities for experienced horseback riders to patrol equestrian trails and educate other riders about protocols and habitat protection. The MAU is not part of the Reserve-sponsored volunteer program, but provides important information on the use and conditions of equestrian trails. This information is communicated directly to the Reserve manager.
Facilities	Native plant garden stewards monitor the condition of the garden and, in consultation with a staff person or trained volunteer, take steps to care for the garden.
Resource Protection, Management, and Restoration	Habitat restoration and steward volunteers monitor conditions in the Reserve or adopt a project or section, and -- in consultation with a staff person or trained volunteer -- take steps to care for and enhance the Reserve. Typical duties include removing non-native plant species, planting and seeding appropriate native plant species, and undertaking dune restoration. Biology volunteers (as described above) also contribute to resource management.

4. Perceived Needs in Public Involvement

There is a perceived need to more fully develop the volunteer program to provide greater recognition and support to volunteers. Currently, the volunteer program is hindered by the lack of a full-time volunteer coordinator. Ideally, the program will establish a corps of trained volunteers who could keep the visitor center open seven days a week. Office of Coastal Resource Management (OCRM) has recommended adding a volunteer coordinator position.

Expansion of the volunteer program in the following areas would improve Reserve operations:

- Docents could be trained to supervise volunteers who work with members of the public.

- A comprehensive volunteer clean-up program could be developed for beaches, trails, flood debris removal, and other needed projects, with particular emphasis on the southern areas of the Reserve.
- Relationships could be improved among the volunteer Mounted Assistance Patrols, equestrians, and bicyclists.
- A pool of public speakers could be developed and trained to make presentations on the Reserve to organizations, schools, and other venues.

B. PUBLIC ACCESS

1. Recreational Visitors

Visitors to the Reserve are also important and valued components of the NERR/NWR. The Reserve recognizes the need to address the compatibility of public uses and endeavors to serve the broad range of interests of those visiting the Reserve.

With the construction of the visitor center, the Reserve has made great strides towards its established goal of creating a northern public entrance that is welcoming and inviting. Despite this accomplishment, there is a perceived need to strengthen the Reserve's identity for visitors and the general public both locally and regionally. Many of the improvements identified in this Management Plan are intended to promote and increase recreational uses in the lesser-used southern end of the site.

On occasion, Border Field State Park is closed due to sewage spills or other public health and safety concerns. It is the aspiration of the Reserve to keep the park open year-round; the improvements to treatment facilities in Tijuana River will contribute toward this goal.

2. Perceived Needs for Public Access

Perceived needs for Public Access at Tijuana River NERR are as follows:

- Improve Monument Road access through: expanded entrance hours, enhanced roadway conditions, and additional roadside facilities.
- Improve signage on Monument Road to better direct visitors to Border Field State Park.

- Improve signage on Route 75 and Interstate 5 to better direct the public to the Reserve's visitor center.
- Provide interpretive signage, trail signs, and directions to parking.
- Increase the visibility of operating agencies in the southern end of the Reserve.
- Better explain Reserve management to the public, emphasizing information on who to contact about access, regulations, and hours of operation at the Reserve.
- Improve the appearance along the southern perimeter of the Reserve to make it easier for visitors to appreciate the national significance of the site.
- Develop a large-scale effort to plan and improve accessibility to the southern end of the Reserve.

C. PUBLIC USE

1. Types of Public Use

The majority of public use at Tijuana River NERR takes place within the Refuge lands and the beaches of Border Field State Park. Visitation and use of the site has increased steadily since the construction of the visitor center and the expansion of Reserve programs.

Estimated public use of the Reserve between 1995 and 1997 is provided below.

TABLE 12: Visitor Use of TRNERR 1995-1997

	1995	1996	1997
Activity	Number of Users	Number of Users	Number of Users
Environmental Education	3,000	3,500	4,500
Interpretive Programs	1,650	2,880	3,500
Special Events	925	940	940
Recreation			
<i>Wildlife Observation</i>	5,000	8,000	9,500
<i>Foot Trails</i>	18,000	18,900	21,000
<i>Equestrian Trails</i>	12,000	13,000	13,000
<i>Beach Use</i>	28,000	29,000	30,500

<i>Surfing</i>	800	800	800
<i>Photography</i>	200	250	300
Research	500	800	850
TOTAL	70,075	78,075	84,890

Source: Station summaries prepared and submitted by FWS and approximations from education coordinator and Refuge manager.

2. Barriers to Public Use

Prior to 1994 and the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper by the U.S. Border Patrol, Reserve staff noted that foot traffic by undocumented immigrants from Mexico was rampant throughout the Reserve and Tijuana River Valley. Unauthorized access by immigrants far exceeded the legitimate public uses encouraged by the Reserve. Reserve staff confirm that this trespassing by immigrants caused concerns among the public and undermined the development and maintenance of public-use facilities throughout the Reserve.

3. Use of Foot Trails System

Authorized foot trails are depicted in Figure 6. Foot trails on Tijuana Slough NWR, north of the Tijuana River, are generally well marked, well maintained, and frequently used by the public for wildlife observation and general walking. These trails included the McCoy Trail, the 5th and Iris Trail, and the Oneonta PERL Trail from Seacoast Drive past the visitor center to Grove Street. The 5th and Iris trail is also posted for equestrian and bicycle use.

While these trails are generally well maintained and marked, some sign maintenance and replacement is needed. There are additional opportunities for interpretive signing and trail improvements.

Dogs are permitted within only three areas of the Reserve and must remain under control on a leash at all times. Dogs are permitted: (1) along the beach north of the Tijuana River mouth on the west side of the dunes, (2) on the marked Fifth and Iris trail in the Refuge, and (3) in the parking/picnic area on the mesa within Border Field State Park.

Foot trails south of the Tijuana River are less well maintained and have suffered from trespassing. These southern trails are also less used due to poor access to trailheads south of the river. Access to trails may be closed, by posting, as needed to protect endangered species or when required to ensure public health and safety.

4. Use of Equestrian Trails System

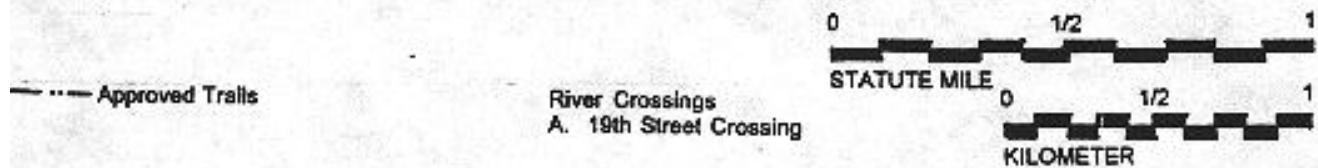
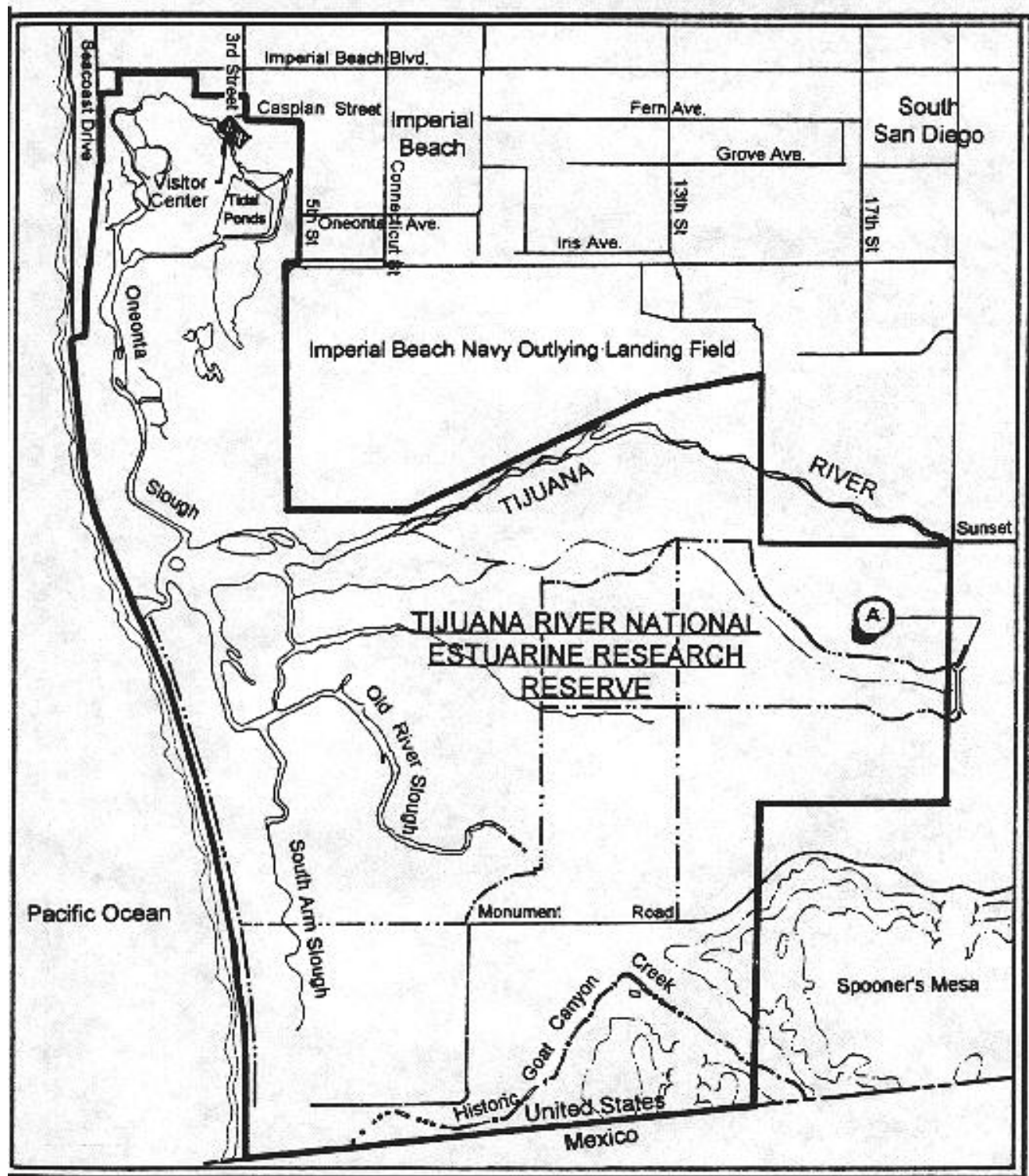
Horseback riding has a long, positive history in the Tijuana Valley. The equestrian community has been a staunch defender of the ecological health of the Valley and has demonstrated its commitment to the Reserve through active participation in many volunteer and community-action programs. The operating agencies view horseback riding as an integral and permanent part of the Reserve's public-use program.

Authorized equestrian trails are depicted in Figure 15. Horseback riding in the Reserve is restricted to designated trails. Dogs are not allowed on equestrian trails. In many cases, trails are maintained by organized and individual users. Many trails are deliberately kept narrow and primitive, both to satisfy users' preferences and to minimize habitat disturbance.

Because many equestrian trails are located in the flood-plain of a braided river, trails are subject to flooding and subsequent damage by siltation and erosion. Following floods, Reserve staff consult with user groups to determine if former trails should be rehabilitated or relocated. Major trail rehabilitation or relocation requires consultation with the FWS, Division of Ecological Services, to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act. Some trails wind through designated critical habitat for least Bell's vireo, a federally listed species. Vireo populations have been increasing despite the presence of equestrian use and solutions to trail rerouting are generally available.

The beaches from south of the Tijuana River's mouth to the Mexican border are some of the few places in southern California where the public can ride next to the Pacific Ocean. It is important to maintain this cultural and recreational experience. Equestrian users recognize that these beaches also provide significant breeding habitat for the endangered California least tern and threatened western snowy plover. During the tern and plover breeding season, horses should travel below the mean high tide line, close to the edge of the surf. Depending on annual distribution of tern nests, temporary closure of some trails may be necessary during the breeding season. Such closures are an accepted part of the Reserve's equestrian program.

The Volunteer Mounted Assistance Unit (MAU) is a group of approximately 35 active members that: assists with trail maintenance; provides first responder assistance in emergencies, including first aid; maintains radio communication capabilities; and reports violations and incidents to law enforcement personnel, including the Border Patrol. The MAU also provides a valuable public information and education service by informing visitors of Reserve regulations. Encouraging proper trail "etiquette" to ensure a safe and enjoyable riding



TRNERR EQUESTRIAN TRAILS SYSTEM
FIGURE 15

experience is an important MAU function. MAU members coordinate regularly with law enforcement park rangers of the C DPR and FWS to inform the operating agencies of trail conditions, violations, and maintenance needs.

Equestrian trails are used by both private citizens and customers of commercial stables in the Tijuana Valley. Both groups have equal access to the Reserve's trails. However, commercial operations have a special responsibility to inform customers of Reserve policies and regulations and to ensure compliance.

In 1991, the Trails Roundtable Committee was formed by the operating agencies, representatives of land-owning groups, and the equestrian community. The Management Authority directs trails issues to the roundtable and looks to it for recommendations on re-routing, maintenance, new trails, and trail usage.

5. Use of Bicycles at TRNERR

In Border Field State Park, unless otherwise marked, all roads accessible to vehicles are also open to bicycles. In Tijuana Slough NWR, bicycles are currently allowed on the Fifth and Iris trail. Bicycle use on other trails within the Refuge is being considered.

6. Perceived Needs in Public Use

a. Foot Trails Use Needs

In the northern end of the Reserve, an improved, accessible trail along the eastern boundary between Grove Street and the 5th & Iris kiosk is needed. The interpretive signs program needs to be developed and implemented.

In the southern end of the Reserve, many improvements are needed. These needs include an improved access road to Border Field State Park, well marked trail heads, parking areas, and improved signage. The viability of pedestrian trails in the southern end of the Reserve should be investigated.

The trails roundtable should determine possible improvements to the pedestrian trails when considering improvement to the equestrian trails system.

b. Equestrian Trail Use Needs

To continue adequate access, enhance enjoyment of equestrian use in the Reserve, and meet resources protection goals, the following actions regarding equestrian trails are needed:

1. The operating agencies, land-owning agencies, the Tijuana River Valley Equestrian Association, and the Mounted Assistance Unit need to execute and implement a memorandum of understanding (MOU) relating to trail routing, maintenance, and use.
2. An improved trail linkage from the area of Border Patrol headquarters to the west end of Sunset Avenue is needed and should be designated, with consideration for endangered species.
3. New river crossings are needed to provide safe access to the south side of the Reserve. Particular emphasis is needed to address the “old 19th Street” crossing.
4. Equestrian use and safety must be addressed in plans to rehabilitate and/or relocate Monument Road.
5. Wetland restoration projects in the southern end of the Reserve should integrate trail and access needs and trails should be included in the engineering designs for marsh restoration projects.
6. Corral and latrine facilities in Border Field State Park need to be upgraded and kept open during visitation hours.
7. Any new trails should be designed to serve multiple needs to reduce the area disturbed by trail construction.
8. Proposals for any new recreation uses of the Reserve (e.g. mountain biking) must be carefully analyzed to ensure they are compatible not only with resource protection, but also with existing authorized uses such as horseback riding.
9. Additional education and enforcement efforts are needed to ensure equestrian compliance with leash laws and area closures for endangered species nesting.
10. The operating agencies together with county parks need to negotiate a Special Use Permit system for commercial stable operators to ensure that businesses profiting from public lands are held accountable for the actions of their customers.
11. The operating agencies should organize a training program for stable owners and their guides to orient them to the purpose, rules, and regulations of the Reserve.

12. Consistent signage needs to be established to improve public awareness of the Reserve's identity and its boundaries.
13. Signage and public awareness about the importance of keeping dogs leashed needs to be improved.

c. Other Recreational Improvements

1. Investigate the potential for diversifying recreational opportunities, including guided canoe and kayak tours.

V. PUBLIC ACCESS, INVOLVEMENT, AND USE PLAN OF ACTION

GOAL 1: Encourage public involvement in Reserve governance and management.

Tasks

- Continue to encourage public participation in Management Authority monthly meetings and involvement on committees.
- Increase notice and posting of Management Authority meetings. Ensure that meeting notices and minutes are circulated to the appointing bodies of the Management Authority members and staff of all elected officials representing portions of the Research Reserve.
- Produce and distribute a periodic Reserve newsletter. (See also Education and Outreach Action Plan.)
- Schedule regular open houses at the Reserve where questions and concerns from the community can be discussed with Management Authority members and Reserve staff.
- Annually convene an evening meeting of the Management Authority where at least one full hour is allocated for public comment.
- Continue the Trails Roundtable Committee and extend membership to boarding and rental stable owners. This Committee should meet at least quarterly to encourage the participation of local business owners with equestrian interests.

GOAL 2: Provide opportunities for volunteer activities in educational, research assistance, recreational, and cultural programs at the Reserve.

Tasks

- Seek funding for a full-time, volunteer coordinator position to administer an effective volunteer program.

- Create work teams among volunteer and agency staff to enable volunteers to participate in day-to-day operations of the Reserve.
- Expand opportunities for volunteers to conduct activities for the public (e.g., school group nature walks).

GOAL 3: Encourage and improve public access and use opportunities to the Reserve to the extent compatible with resource protection, with emphasis in the southern areas.

Objective 3a: Restore public access at Monument Road.

Tasks

- Repair Monument Road and improve the entrance.
- Incorporate equestrian uses and safety concerns in the new design of Monument Road.
- Install adequate and interpretive signage.

Objective 3b: Maintain and improve signage to clarify Reserve boundaries and access points.

Tasks

- Maintain printed materials that explain the Reserve, its purpose, and its boundaries.
- Implement national graphic and industrial standards for signage and interpretive facilities.
- Improve signage to Reserve on Route 5 and 75.

Objective 3c: Maintain all existing facilities and improve facilities in the southern areas of the Reserve.

Tasks

- Develop and facilitate a regularly scheduled maintenance plan for the Reserve.

- Design and install interpretive signs to explain habitat and recreational opportunities.
- Develop a day-use, equestrian camp ground at the old parking lot below the border mesa.
- Restore the day-use camping and equestrian staging site at the lower parking lot in southern Border Field State Park. Horse pens, picnic tables, barbecues, tie racks, bicycle racks, and a portable rest room are needed.

Objective 3d: Establish recreational guidelines for low-impact use of the Reserve.

Tasks

- Review potential impacts of proposed new trail uses (such as mountain biking on state lands) to ensure they are compatible not only with resource protection, but also with existing authorized uses.
- Upgrade upper Border Field State Park. Actions include: undertaking erosion control measures and providing signage, viewing facilities, and recreational facilities (i.e., telescopes, bicycle racks, and barbecues).
- Maintain pedestrian and equestrian trails that provide quality interpretive experiences. Construct additional trails where needed.
- Encourage the development of adequate and appropriate parking areas with trailheads and interpretive signage, especially in the southern end of the Reserve.
- Continue to develop community outreach programs such as guided walks, films, talks, and equestrian activities.
- Promote continued Reserve-sponsored, equestrian activities such as trail maintenance projects/potlucks and Adopt-a-Trail Programs within the river valley and guided (birding) rides.

Objective 3e: Maintain and improve recreational opportunities on equestrian trails.

Tasks

- Work with Border Patrol to minimize impacts to the equestrian trail system.

- Schedule a series of equestrian trail workshops to consider existing trails, new trails, and proposed linkages. These workshops will assess potential realignments due to natural changes, mitigation activities, and Border Patrol access issues.
- Work with commercial stable operators through the Special Use Permit system to ensure customers are fully informed of Reserve regulations. Operating agencies will set a usage fee for commercial operators, but will also accept “in-kind” payment. Proposed “in-kind” methods of payment are: trail maintenance, cowbird trapping, and assistance with posting and monitoring of tern colonies.
- Prepare an educational flyer summarizing relevant Reserve regulations (e.g., leash laws, avoiding sensitive habitats) for distribution to visitors renting horses from stables.

GOAL 4: Emphasize and expand priority, wildlife-dependent recreation activities with wildlife observation and photography.

Objective 4a: Maintain and improve recreational opportunities for wildlife observation and photography on designated trails.

Tasks

- Improve signage on foot trails, particularly in the southern end of the Reserve.
- Improve trails and trailhead markings throughout the Reserve, with particular emphasis in the southern end.
- Post interpretive signs for new restoration projects and research projects.
- Seek support to build an approved trail along the eastern boundary of the Reserve between Grove Street and the 5th & Iris kiosk.
- Incorporate opportunities for recreational activities into improvement plans for the southern end of the Reserve.

Objective 4b: Increase and diversify wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities compatible with resource protection.

Tasks

- Investigate carefully managed, seasonal water-related recreational opportunities, such as wildlife observation from canoes and kayaks.
- Explore linkages to existing trails systems, including the Otay Valley Regional Parks Trails System.
- Promote programs such as ecotourism visits by intercession/school groups and the Imperial Beach Bird Fest.
- Develop at least one accessible wildlife observation/photography blind in NWR.

